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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the issues that Blacks perceive as salient to their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with communication with Whites, and whether these issues were independent of age, biological sex, and income. Two groups of subjects, selected from economically determined working class students in a large introductory speech communication course at a southwestern university, responded to a questionnaire concerning two recent social conversations with a person of a different ethnic group--only Blacks conversing with Whites were chosen for analysis. Responses from the first group of 31 subjects were used to generate the issues, and those of the second group of 24 were used to test for coding reliability. Analyses produced seven categories of satisfying and dissatisfying interethnic communication: (1) negative stereotyping; (2) acceptance; (3) emotional expressiveness; (4) authenticity; (5) understanding; (6) goals attainment; and (7) powerlessness. These categories appeared to be reliable and relatively independent of sex, age, and family income. Whether the categories constitute a uniquely Black perspective on communication effectiveness is a question that has not yet been answered, but they do provide a basis for exploring effectiveness in a variety of settings and relationships. (Twenty-two references are attached.) (NKA)

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A Black Perspective on Interethnic Communication Effectiveness

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A Black Perspective on Interethnic Communication Effectiveness

ABSTRACT

This study identified the issues Blacks perceive as salient to their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with conversations with Whites. Content analyses of conversational descriptions were used to construct seven categories: negative stereotyping, acceptance, emotional expressiveness, authenticity, understanding, goal attainment, and powerlessness. These categories were then used to code a second set of conversational descriptions. The reliability of the coding was .78 and the categories were found to be independent of age, biological sex, and income.

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A Black Perspective on Interethnic Communication Effectiveness

Many factors influence communication effectiveness, none more than ethnic culture. With news reports crowded with stories of ethnic strife, ethnic differences pose a challenge to communicators; a challenge to find a means for bridging cultural diversity.

Effective communication requires that interactants be motivated to communicate, have knowledge of self, other, situation and topic, and have the requisite communication skills (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Effectiveness results in satisfying communication (Spitzberg & Hecht, 1984). Ethnicity not only manifests itself in each of these areas, but also influences the ability of interactants to adjust to and accommodate each other (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977). Members of different ethnic groups do not share a common set of communication rules (Collier, Hecht, & Ribeau, 1986) and are dissimilar in their willingness to shift their rules in order to adjust to the ethnicity of their dyadic partner (Collier, 1982). It is important, therefore, to identify ethnic perspectives on communication effectiveness in order to more fully define the construct.

Blacks are an important ethnic co-population in the United States. They represent a numerically large group, and their history, including the civil rights movement, documents their influence on the social and political milieu of the times. The influence of Black culture can be traced in numerous ways

including music, dance, sports, literature and virtually all areas of the American lifestyle.

A unique, Black communication style is well-documented. Researchers identify a Black style for language (Kochman, 1981a;1981b; Smitherman, 1977), nonverbal behavior (Saxter, 1970; Johnson, 1971; Jones & Aiello, 1973; LaFrance & Mayo, 1976; Rosegrant & McCroskey, 1975) and interaction patterns (Kochman, 1982).

These and other stylistic differences sometimes present, obstacles to effective interaction with mainstream, white Americans. Whites and Blacks are found to differ in interaction patterns (Asante & Noor Al-Deen, 1984), uncertain reduction (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1984) and interaction management (Ickes, 1984; LaFrance & Mayo, 1976). More directly, Hecht and Ribeau (1984) report differences in satisfying, intra-ethnic communication.

These studies suggest problems inherent in Black-White relationships. If interactants do not share common knowledge, motivation, and styles, then conversational effectiveness is problematic. This study sought to address an aspect of this larger question by examining the issues Blacks perceive as most salient to their satisfying and dissatisfying conversations with Whites. In a sense, we sought to identify a Black interethnic relational agenda by examining the issues they see as most salient to their communication satisfaction. While these issues

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constitute only a portion of effectiveness, they provide a complement to the stylistic descriptions of previous research which do not directly address questions of effective communication. Since research on mainstream culture suggests that typical communication and effective communication are not isomorphic (Hecht, 1984), the effectiveness orientation is an important one. Further, since most studies of communicative effectiveness are limited to mainstream culture, this extension to Black culture is promising.

In order to focus this project, two limitations were employed. First, effectiveness was defined as satisfying communication. Previous research shows satisfaction to be the emotional response to effective interpersonal encounters (Bochner & Kelly, 1974; Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1961; Spitzberg & Hecht, 1984; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Thus it is assumed that satisfying encounters are effective and dissatisfying ones are ineffective.

Second, since the first step in research is description we attempted to develop a typology of issues Blacks perceive as most salient to satisfying and dissatisfying conversations. Future research will have to determine whether the issues so identified are truly culturally unique and, further, link these issues to other variables. Accordingly, the following research questions are posed:

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1. What issues to Blacks perceive in satisfying and dissatisfying conversations with Whites?
2. Are these issues independent of age, biological sex, and income?

METHODS

Respondents

Two groups of respondents from the same population were utilized in this study. The first group was used to generate the issues and consisted of 31 respondents (15 males and 16 females). The second group was used to test for the reliability of the coding scheme and consisted of 24 respondents (6 males, 17 females, 1 no gender identification). Respondents were student volunteers from a large, multi-sectioned, introductory speech communication course at a university in the southwestern United States. These students were predominantly of economically-determined working class families (the majority with incomes below \$25,000 per year) and ranged in age from 17-33, with an average age of 26. Since the course is required of all students, respondents are representative of this large, urban, multi-ethnic campus, but may not be representative of nonstudents or other geographic areas.

Procedures

Respondents filled out a questionnaire asking them to recall two recent conversations with a person of a different ethnic group which took place in a social situation. Respondents

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indicated their age, sex, and family income. Each participant recalled both a satisfying and a dissatisfying conversation, with the order randomly determined. We selected only those respondents who indicated they were Black Americans conversing with a White acquaintance.

For each type of conversation respondents responded in detail to a series of questions: (1) describe the location and topic of conversation; (2) describe and explain what they did or said that was satisfying or dissatisfying; (3) describe and explain what the other did or said that was satisfying or dissatisfying; (4) describe and explain anything else in the conversation that was satisfying or dissatisfying.

Analyses

The data from the first group were content analyzed separately by each investigator, then the results combined. First, the report of each satisfying and dissatisfying conversation was read and the salient communication behaviors recorded on separate index cards. Second, idiosyncratic or repetitious responses were eliminated. Third, the cards were sorted into categories by each investigator. The categories were intended to reflect the issues raised by the Black respondents and which constitute an agenda for satisfying and dissatisfying inter-ethnic conversations from a Black perspective. It should be noted that one of the investigators is Black while the other is White. Finally, the separate category systems were combined.

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In the second stage, two independent coders naive to the research questions were trained on the category system. They coded the questionnaires derived from the second group and interrater reliability was calculated.

RESULTS

Analyses produced 7 categories of satisfying and dissatisfying communication. These were called negative stereotyping, acceptance, emotional expressiveness, authenticity, understanding, goals attainment, and powerlessness. Overall interrater reliability was .78. Reliability was .81 for satisfying conversations and .70 for dissatisfying conversations.

Negative stereotyping involves situations in which the conversational partner racially categorizes and ascribes characteristics of an ethnic group to the participant rather than treating the person as an individual. A black female reports dissatisfaction when the other person "seemed to say to me that she (a third party) was Black and you know how they are." Conversely, a black female was satisfied because she "didn't feel put on the spot to speak for the whole of the Black race." Finally, another Black female was satisfied when the other "was speaking to me as another person, and didn't let my color interfere with the conversation." Negative stereotyping, when present, is a source of dissatisfaction and, perhaps because of the pervasiveness of prejudice, when absent is a source of satisfaction. In the second sample, negative stereotyping was

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recorded at a moderate frequency overall (11%) and is observed at slightly higher rate in descriptions of dissatisfaction (14%) than of satisfaction (9%).

Many respondents report that their satisfaction is predicated on acceptance, a feeling that the other accepts, confirms, and respects their opinions. For example, a Black female remarked that she was satisfied because there was "mutual respect for each others' beliefs." In the second sample, 16% of the observed responses were coded as acceptance, with all of these recorded as incidences of satisfaction (25% of that total). Perhaps lack of acceptance is coded as one of the other categories.

The third category is emotional expressiveness which refers to the communication of feelings. One respondent was dissatisfied because she could not express her own emotions, saying "I was dissatisfied that I maintained control and failed to curse her out." Emotional expressiveness can refer to both self and interactional partner, with lack of expressiveness on either's part seen as dissatisfying. This category was not frequently observed in the second sample (5%), but was equally present in descriptions of satisfying and dissatisfying conversations.

Authenticity is the label applied to genuineness; open disclosure on the positive side and evasiveness on the negative side. One respondent derived satisfaction from the conversation

"by disclosing information about myself which I usually can't do with someone I don't know well." Another was dissatisfied because she "was not direct about what I wanted to discuss with this person and did a lot of beating around the bush." Authenticity also is infrequently observed in the second sample (4%), with similar numbers in satisfying and dissatisfying descriptions.

Feelings of understanding are also important to interactant satisfaction. Satisfaction for many respondents was keyed to the feeling that their meaning was successfully conveyed. For example, one respondent reported that "there was a genuine exchange of thinking, feeling, and caring." Understanding is the third most frequently observed category in the second sample (17%), with an equal proportion represented in satisfying and dissatisfying conversations.

Achieving objectives or obtaining desired ends from communication constitute the category of goal attainment. Black respondents seemed to desire a feeling of accomplishment, feeling satisfied when this is obtained and dissatisfied when it is not. One respondent noted dissatisfaction because "no information was exchanged in terms of what I was seeking." Goal attainment was the second most frequent category in the second sample (20%), with a greater proportion observed in satisfying interactions (24% of that total) than in dissatisfying interactions (14%).

The final category was labeled powerlessness and involves

feelings of being controlled, manipulated and trapped. Conversely, satisfaction is manifested when interactants feel they have some control or influence over the conversation. One female explained her dissatisfaction by saying that the other was "trying to persuade me using subtle tactics and assertiveness." A Black male described a dissatisfying conversation in which he did not get an adequate chance to express himself. He said that the other "tried to carry on the conversation all by himself. . . he would keep talking and interrupted me whenever I tried to say something." This is the most frequently observed category in the second sample (27% overall), largely due to its prevalence in descriptions of dissatisfying conversations (44%). However, it also seems clear that feelings of 'empowerment' can lead to satisfaction, as the category is observed in 15% of the satisfying descriptions.

Chi square tests were used to test for relationships between the categories and the demographic variables of age, sex, and family income. Fisher's exact test was substituted where cell frequencies were below 5. Each category was tested separately, resulting in 21 separate tests. Of these, only one significant relationship was observed, that being the one between sex and authenticity (Chi Square = 6.21; df = 2; $p < .05$). Females used this category slightly more than males.

DISCUSSION

The categories developed in this study provide a start toward identifying a Black perspective on interethnic effectiveness. These categories can be used reliably and appear relatively independent of sex, age, and family income. The sex data must be interpreted tentatively due to the small sample of males in the second study. However, the lack of variation across age and income groups provides an argument for the ethnic-base of these issues.

The question must still be asked if these categories constitute a uniquely Black perspective on communication effectiveness. An answer to this question is not directly available from the current data. Indications of the cultural uniqueness are available from a number of sources.

First, a similar analysis of Mexican American conversational descriptions (Ribeau, Hecht, & Sedano, 1985) produced only some overlap. Both groups shared concern for negative stereotyping, acceptance, and emotional expressiveness. The other categories, however, appear unique to the Black perspective.

Second, while each of these themes has been discussed separately in mainstream communication literature, none of the approaches to communicative competence (e.g., Bochner & Kelly, 1974; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Wiemann, 1977) or interethnic effectiveness (Hammer, Gudykunst & Wiseman, 1978; Gudykunst, 1983; Abe & Wiseman, 1982) derived from mainstream culture

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utilizes these themes in this particular style. Indeed, the themes seem closely tied to previous discussions of Black style. In a study of intra-ethnic communication, Hecht and Ribeau (1984) report that when compared to Whites, Blacks place greater emphasis on deep, intimate involvement. This seem consistent with the present categories of authenticity and understanding. Hecht and Ribeau go on to report that Blacks also place more stress on other orientation and goals. These findings are similar to the present issues of acceptance and goal attainment respectively. Finally, Hecht and Ribeau found that Whites are more concerned with maintaining a relaxed atmosphere, findings in keeping with the discovered emphasis on emotional expressiveness.

The work of Kochman (1981a;b) and Smitherman (1977) delineating a Black style also support the present findings. Kochman describes the oral tradition of Black culture which manifests itself in a spontaneous and verbally aggressive style. Smitherman describes 'high talk,' a highly dramatic and stylized form of expression derived from African roots. The categories of emotional expressiveness, authenticity, and understanding seem well within the described style. Expressiveness is required for the dramatic effect and produces part of the aggressiveness. Authenticity is derived from the spontaneity and facilitates the stylized story telling of the oral culture. Understanding becomes an important value when one works so hard to convey one's message.

The categories of powerlessness and negative stereotyping are probably characteristic of all low power groups. These groups are denied access to traditional sources of power and this position becomes institutionalized. At the same time, any 'out group' is stereotyped when treated as a category rather than as an individual. Separation of groups denies the mainstream, high power group access to the out group except through limited media contact. As a result, powerlessness and stereotyping become salient issues for interethnic communication.

This project began the process of identifying a Black perspective on interethnic communication. These categories provide a basis for exploring effectiveness in a variety of settings and relationships. The reliability of the categories is good and they proved to be stable across age, sex, and income levels. Future research will examine how different groups of Blacks perceive these issues and how Blacks and other groups differ in their notions of satisfying communication.

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